

Ss Peter and Paul 2020

The Feast of St Peter and St Paul is one which, for the Church of England, has particular ecumenical significance. If you look at the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, you will find that 29th June is observed only as the Feast of St Peter. St Paul has another day, the 25th January, the Feast of his Conversion. The catholic calendar had long had that feast as well, of course, but it also had several other commemorations of St Peter. The Reformed Church of England did its best to cut the number of particular liturgical days, but also needed to celebrate St Paul especially, as the patron saint of the European Reformation, and the antidote, as Protestantism saw it, to the claims of the Papacy. Hence St Peter went on one day, and St Paul on another.

Underlying this separation is a misleading but highly prevalent view of the New Testament which found favour, unsurprisingly, in Protestant scholarship. According to this view Paul represents a forward

thinking faith based vision of Christ, and Peter represents a rules based legalistic faction in the early church which wanted to hold on to all the ancient customs of the Jewish law. It is true that the letter to the Galatians gives us evidence of an argument between the two, over questions such as circumcision, and who shares his table with whom else. But to suppose that we can understand the birth of Christianity in so simple and oppositional a way is, frankly, rather daft.

There is a temptation to scholarly division on this day, and a temptation to ecumenical division as well. We can be glad that the celebration of the two principal apostles together is very much a demonstration of unity on the part of the Western church. But it is also a piece of Roman propaganda, and I use the word Roman here not theologically but geographically and historically: one of the things the Western church is doing in keeping Peter and Paul together is marking the centrality of the city of Rome in the early history and mission of the church. It's an emphasis which is unsurprising to our Western

eyes and ears, but one which might not be celebrated in, for example, Alexandria or what used to be Constantinople.

The fact is, we do like to compartmentalize and divide the great figures of the Christian faith, because we like to organize Christian history, and the reason we like to organize Christian history is because – to be blunt – we like to organize God. There is something just a little uncomfortable, a little unpredictable, a little less than respectable, about the call of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. If we can understand that call and that work in sections, even in factions, then we can start to do what we most want to do – be in control of the Christian faith. By understanding Paul to represent the intellectualised, and individualised, version of Bible based Christianity which makes faith into a rational decision and salvation consequent on that decision, we have a version of Paul with which we can live – we might like it or not like it, but we can comprehend it. And by understanding Peter to represent an ecclesial

account of what Christianity is, with obedience to the church and the centrality of tradition as the vehicle of Christian truth, we can again provide ourselves with a Peter with whom we can deal. In both cases, we have a saint that we think we can handle.

If the events of the last few months have taught us anything, they have certainly taught us that we are really not in control. There's an irony in the fact that we have discovered our lack of control over the world by ourselves being controlled – restricted, shut up, locked down. We were never entirely in control, but we believed ourselves to be. The same is true with the life of the church. By losing control of our worship and our community, we are reminded of just how influential in our Christian lives is that desire to be in control. The problem is, of course, that our desire to organize and compartmentalize is part of our desire to be in charge.

There is a lesson for us from this particular feast day. To make the call of Christ and the activity of the Spirit

into something which works on our terms, is precisely the error of both Peter and Paul in the New Testament. St Peter's failings listed by the gospel writers are numerous – the poor man comes to represent the dullness of the disciples as a whole. The threefold denial which marks such a dark stage in the story of the passion is merely the climax of a whole series of misunderstandings with which Jesus is confronted by all his male followers. When Jesus' idea of messiahship does not tally with that of the newly named Peter, then Jesus is forced to give him another name –Satan. The rebuke could not be stronger. God's way will not conform to our expectations.

Paul, or rather Saul, had similarly to be taught. As he makes clear in Philippians 3, he was absolutely secure in the faith of his fathers. Confident in the law and in his own Pharisaic tradition, he was so sure that this new Jesus movement did not conform with the God he thought he knew, that he was ready willing and able to subject it to vicious persecution. His conversion was, of

course, even more dramatic than Simon Peter's call by the Galilean lake, but both were summoned by Christ to undergo a new education, a re-learning of what the ways of God might be, a questioning of all their neat systems and assumptions and orderings.

Both Peter and Paul received new names when called by God. You and I were called by name in baptism and given the new identity which unites us with Christ himself. And yet still we need to be reminded of the lesson, still we need to realise that God will not be controlled, that tidy divisions and easy predictions and familiar patterns are not the stuff of the Spirit. Peter and Paul re-learned not just who on earth they were themselves, but who on earth was the God of Israel, the creator who gives himself in love for the life of the world and for the church which is his body on earth. Our task in celebrating Peter and Paul is to remember that to be the church is not first to be organized, not first to be institutionalized, but first simply to be called.